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House of an Architect

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Telling Stories: Objects & Narratives

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House of an Architect

*“Setting is more than scene in works of art...it is often the
armature around which the work revolves”¹*

Architectural space and its interior setting is the background to human life, we often overlook its significance and this is perhaps most true of how we encounter and reflect on domestic space. The subject of home / house might seem so ubiquitous as to be banal but it is almost inevitably an expression of the lives lived within its boundaries and its edges; this is perhaps self-evident. It is also evident that over time we wear “grooves” in the places we frequent and occupy – we adapt spaces, leave traces and the detritus of everyday life that speak of our presence and our absence. In this way the home / house archetype reveals narrative traces of inhabitation. But a that duality of home / house is not solely a functional object, it reflects the aspirations, persona and history of both its dweller and designer it has “a dual role as aesthetic experience and functional residence”². As such home / house can also be described as the “oldest experiment in environmental engineering”³: a shelter, enclosure and refuge, and therefore fundamental to the way we exist in the world. As Juhani Pallasmaa characterizes it “ Home is where we hide our secrets and express our private selves.....a delineator between the realms of public and private”⁴ This paper briefly considers the many complex ways that the home / house archetype can be read as a constructed narrative, specifically through reference to the ideas of Christian Norberg Schultz and Juhani Pallasmaa and illustrates these through detailed reference to two domestic examples.

Definition and Language of House

Defining the domestic interior requires terminology that reflects something paradoxical about that home /

house dichotomy. At one level home / house reflects both a universal concept whilst simultaneously implying subtly different and conflicting meanings. First “house”: When we *house* something, we provide a distinct place for it whilst also containing it, a house therefore is a container for a life.

Programme of House (Noun / Verb)

We might think of a home / house as a sequence or series of rooms; of living-room, dining-room, kitchen, bedroom etc. Such labels relate to human activity, to prosaic *actions*, and offers a convenient, though narrow description that fails ultimately to frame the nuances, meaning and symbolism which we attach to our domestic experiences. It is a simple move to think instead of a space to *relax*; to *socialize*; to *eat*; to *escape*; to *dream*. The is actually defined by verbs. Our framing of this discussion through a *home / house* archetype reflects other professional dualities between Interior and Architectural practice whilst home / house lends itself conceptually to further interstitial parallels; for some it is the ‘slash’ between home ‘/’ house that reveals the interesting spatial territory. However, it is difficult to imagine a room (particularly in a domestic interior) which does not contain some form of activity; have a function. In his essay “Species of Spaces” Georges Perec examines the nature and language of space and how we occupy it, beginning with the intimate space of the page (in which he writes) and moving out via our dwellings to the cosmos reminiscent of Eames’s seminal 1968 film “The Powers of Ten”. In Perec’s section on “the apartment” he speculates on the possibility of an “absolutely and intentionally useless” room:

“It wouldn’t be a junkroom, it wouldn’t be an extra bedroom, or a corridor.....it would be a functionless space. It would serve for nothing, relate to nothing.....language itself, seemingly proved unsuited to describing this nothing, this void, as if we could only speak of what is full, useful and functional.... How to expel functions, rhythms, habits, how to expel necessity? I imagined myself in an apartment so vast that I could not remember how many rooms it had. All the rooms except one, were used for something. The point was to find this last room....there is something Borgesian in trying to imagine a room reserved for listening to Haydn’s symphony number 48 in c, another devoted to reading the barometer or to cleaning my right big toe.....”⁵

“Machines” And Their Domain

Focusing in more detail still, beyond the notion of home / house being an inhabited container, we can consider the components, elements or objects which structure the house. Charles Moore ⁶ characterizes the artefacts of the house as machines “the dining table which flows out from the wall, the built-in seat by the fireplace....the bar, the toilet, the sink and the refrigerator and the storage shelves – all are *machines* designed for a specific purpose and anchored in place. They are not only fixed in the space they fix the space”⁷ and

domestic life is therefore structured around objects and their “domain”. Norberg-Schultz draws attention to these significant sites within the dwelling.

He concludes that while we also “dwell” in cities and settlements – our understanding of these spaces is through path and movement, within the house it is centred in objects and places. Elements (essentially furniture) serve as foci.⁸ And how anchored objects might “fix” the space or, as Norberg-Schultz implies – provide a *foci* -are helpful in reflecting on Allan Wexler investigations into human activity in the built environment through experimental structures and domestic (and exterior) objects. Wexler’s capacity to *frame*, rather than *resolve* problems relies upon artistic series, permutations and experimentation which ultimately exposes everyday actions and transforms these objects into “...mechanisms that activate ritual, ceremony and movement, turning these ordinary activities into theatre...”⁹ of a daily narrative. In his “Crate House” project of 1991, (Fig 1) Wexler (who initially trained as an architect) begins by defining the house in terms of four “rooms”; a bedroom, bathroom, kitchen and living room. Each function (defined by a series of objects, e.g. cooker, fridge, sink, table, chair, pan, knife, plate, glass... and so on), are each contained within a crate which can be wheeled out from a central core.¹⁰

Wexler’s work exposes how easy it is for our orthodox spatial thinking, and our tendency to be seduced by spectacle, whilst failing to notice the extra-ordinary within the ordinary. In looking at Wexler, one cannot fail to begin to question, “What defines a kitchen? What objects do we choose for each function? What actions do these objects imply?...these things I isolate, making them sculpture; their use being theatre, making each day’s existence into a dance”¹¹ Crate House sits on the shifting boundary between architecture, design and fine art-as does most of Wexler’s extraordinary work but it offers an acute re-examination of the nature of functionality and our reading of the home /house archetype, helping us to visualize the spatial actions and consequent reactions of the most mundane domestic activity, yet does it cease to be art if used? We cannot experience Crate House without activating each crate, unpacking the objects they contain. It requires the presence of a palpably absent inhabitant to be architecture.

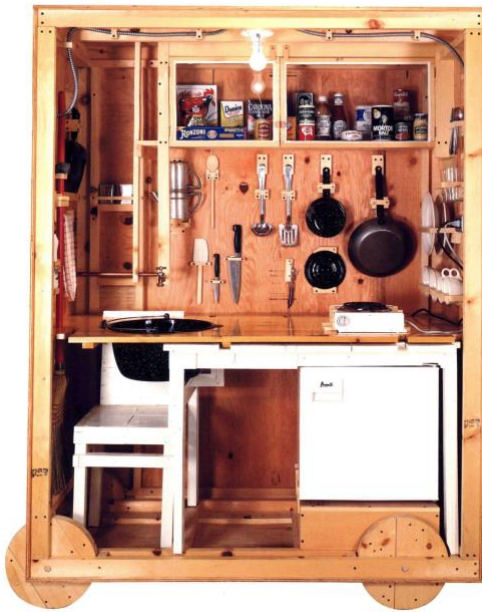


Figure 1: Kitchen from Crate House, Allan Wexler 1991

Wexler's work both records and structures actions, it implies a domestic narrative through its selection and presentation of inanimate objects. In Wexler's work "humans are dancers who create their space through rhythm and movement."

Domestic Choreography

*"Space contains compressed time.
That is what space is for"*¹²

Perec's speculations also elaborate on time and process and question our dependence on "nouns" to describe and structure space; "the activities of the day correspond to slices of time, and to each slice of time there corresponds one room of the apartment" he goes on to describe the activity of the household in precisely timed sequence allocating each activity to a space – he then suggests alternatives: "it is not hard to imagine an apartment whose layout would depend, no longer on the activities of the day, but on what the functional relationships are between the rooms"¹³ UNStudio's "Mobius House" (Fig. 2) might be seen as an attempt to make concrete Perec's ambition. The clients were a family – two adults who worked separately, but both from home, and their young children. The Mobius diagram of the house was conceived as a pair of continuous intertwining loops which cross-over and twist: "two intertwining paths, which trace how two people can live together, yet apart, meeting at certain points which become shared spaces....a graphic representation of twenty four hours of family life"¹⁴

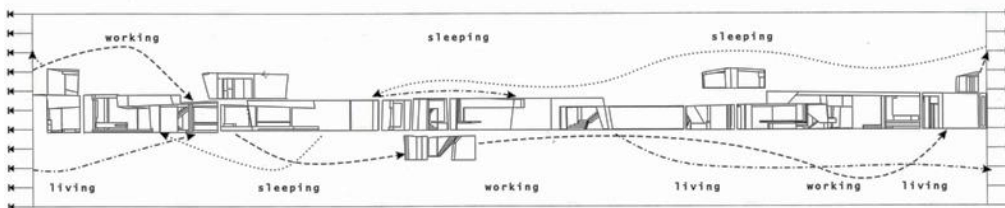


Figure 2: Mobius House, UN Studio 1998

House / Home / Dwelling

Those examples mentioned above are theoretical investigations into the nature of the private house and its functional role in sheltering and containing activity. In this context it is entirely appropriate that they speak of *house* rather than *home*. Abstracted from an emotional response, they consider the generic rather than the individual. Conversely, when we talk of *home*, we indicate a house inhabited; a place in which we dwell. The substance of home is perhaps “secreted by the dweller.....within the framework of the dwelling. Home is an expression of the dwellers personality and his unique patterns of life”¹⁵. Dwelling again implies a subtly different interpretation. It is used here in the terms outlined by Heidegger:

*“what does it mean to build? The old German word for build was “baun” and means to dwell. That is, to stay, to remain...the word “bin” (am) came from the old word to build, so that “I am” “you are” means: I dwell, you dwell. The way that you are and I am, the way that men are on earth is “buan”, dwelling.....dwelling is the basic principle of existence”*¹⁶

Consequently, according to Norberg-Schultz, “the house,....remains the central place of human existence, the place where the child learns to understand his being in the world, and the place from which man departs and to which he returns.”¹⁷ Norberg-Schultz further expands on this idea in his 1985 book “*The Concept of Dwelling*” defining four “modes” of dwelling –

- as *settlement*
- as *urban space*
- as *institution*
- as *private house*

this last he characterizes as “a refuge where man gathers and expresses those memories which make up his personal world”¹⁸.

Threshold, Privacy and Refuge: Layers of Space

*“I am the space where I am”*¹⁹

A house / home can be understood in terms of a series of thresholds which separate the public from the private self. While we exist and dwell according to the definition given above, in settlements and urban spaces, the home / house represents the personal refuge, one to which we can control access. The essence of the house is interior space; in the house we have withdrawn ²⁰, the site of the first architecture being the interface: the sheltering wall which defines and protects interior space.

Norberg-Schultz uses the example of Hadrian's Villa Adriana. Here Hadrian constructed, within the overall complex, a private dwelling, circular in plan and protected by a moat and an encircling wall ²¹, these features would normally be associated with a defended castle, here they are primarily symbolic. The most familiar domestic dwelling does this in subtler fashion; from the street to the doorstep; the doorstep to the porch; the porch to the hall; the "public face" of the "front room" with its carefully controlled and displayed artefacts ²²; the most private, intimate and contained spaces, the bedrooms where we are at our most vulnerable, are hidden away upstairs. This intimacy of dwelling spaces is significant. Pallasmaa likens seeing an unattended home to "seeing its dweller naked" ²³.

Client as Central Character

The client is the central character in any architectural narrative. Unlike a fine artist, for an architect, the client comes first, the artefact second. The client is the "mechanism for production" ²⁴; the client's way of life, aspirations, likes and dislikes are central to the development of an architectural idea, its realization and its representation. This is truer in the generation of domestic space than for any other architectural programme. The Architect had, historically "taken", as opposed to being "given" the central role as interpreter, establishing how the occupants will live (or how they aspire to live); what they wish to project and what they wish to remain secret. The exchanges between architect and client define the narrative structure of the resulting home / house. However, such conceits have exposed this masculine and mechanistic metaphor; none more so than in the early twentieth century. In 1925 Le Corbusier composed a famous letter to his client, Mdme Lise Meyer. Corbusier projects himself (and his client) into the unrealized house, describing in a sequence of annotated drawings a series of spaces. The drawings have been compared to the scenario sketches pioneered by Russian film-maker Sergei Eisenstein, and here Corbusier appropriates Eisenstein's cinematic device of "montage of juxtaposed step-by-step, "shot-by-shot", short-long vistas" ²⁵. In the text Corbusier describes what Madame Meyer will see, what she will do, the sounds, and smells of the house. The spaces are illustrated as if already occupied.

"from the boudoir, you have gone up onto a roof with neither slates nor tiles, but a solarium and swimming pool with grass growing between the paving slabs. Above you is the sky. With the surrounding walls no one could see you. In the evening you would see the stars and the sombre mass of the trees in the folie St James" We see Mdme Meyer's gloves on a table as though she had just left the room. ²⁶



Figure 3: Letter to M. Meyer

A house is also a microcosm of architecture. As already stated it perhaps represents the original essence of architecture in that it deals with shelter, with human existence in the world. As such it is also an inevitable vehicle for the exploration of architectural ideas. As Corbusier articulates this in much quoted passage from *Vers une Architecture*:

"My house is practical. I thank you as I thank the railway engineer or a telephone service... but you have not touched my heart. You apply stone, wood and concrete, that is construction... ingenuity is at work... But suddenly you have touched my heart, you have done me good, and I am happy... this is beautiful... this is architecture..."

In this historical example, the home / house emerges through, and is, a dialogue between client and designer. An expression of the client, but one filtered through the interpretation of the designer. This is the difference between the birds nest and the primitive hut; what is invested in the dwelling by both architect and inhabitant 28.

Presence of Absence

But most unforgettable of all were the walls themselves. The stubborn life of these rooms had not let itself be trampled out. It was still there; it clung to the nails that had been left, it stood on the remaining handbreadth of flooring, it crouched under the corner joints where there was still a little bit of interior. One could see that it was in the paint, which, year by year it had slowly altered: blue into mouldy green, green into grey, and yellow into an old stale rotting white. But it was also in the spots that had kept fresher, behind mirrors, pictures and wardrobes; for it had drawn and redrawn their contours and had been with spiders and dust even in these hidden places that now lay bared. It was in every flayed strip, it was in the damp blisters at the tower edges of the wallpapers; it wavered in the torn-off shreds and sweated out of the foul patches that had come into being long ago. And from these walls once blue and green and yellow, which were framed by the future tracks of the demolished partitions, the breath of these lives stood out – the clammy sluggish musty breath, which no wind had yet scattered. 29

The passage above is familiar in its description of how life can penetrate dead matter. Our domestic environment, perhaps more than any other structure is projects a powerful melancholic sense of past inhabitation; of absent owners. The homes we inhabit, those we visit, those, like Whiteread's "HOUSE" that gain notoriety or cultural exposure retain traces of past activity, and intimate occupation, an almost tangible presence which remains when the central protagonist is absent¹. And though the homes occupants will invest objects with meaning and significance through contact with them, daily use the temporary visitor and observer projects an alternative life and meaning onto the abstracted artefacts of a domestic life through an interpretation of their own experience and memory. Adrian Searle recognises this in his critique of "HOUSE" by Rachael Whiteread:

"what finally has been exposed is an empty setting, a place where people once led a life of intimacies, grew up grew old and died. And, one might add, fucked, rowed, worried, slept, ate, shat, fought, laughed and lied. No one looks out of the windows anymore, no one puts out the milk bottles on the stoop; no one shouts 'Kevin come in your tea's ready' or returns home late from the pub and fumbles with the keys in the lock." 30

Whiteread's "HOUSE" is disturbing. It both removes the skin of the protecting wall, and then, by its nature as an artwork, forces us to look at the familiar scenario in profoundly different ways. We are voyeurs intruding on an intimacy and an interiority which existed only as an inherently private setting – instead she invites us to acknowledge the intrusion. The dissection, and spatial inversion of a dwelling turned outside in is a little like amateur psychoanalysis at one remove, occasionally uncomfortable and intrusive but compelling.

Home / House of an Architect?

The projects we have chosen to focus on are expressions of their architect makers. They exist in different contexts; physically and culturally. They are generated by different preoccupations and goals but share some common antecedents and both reflect complex and challenging agendas which combine the functional aspects of house and the "sociology, psychology, and psychoanalysis" ³¹ of dwelling; as such they reflect the intellects which created them.

John Soane: House as Narrative.

"I am here today but I shall be dead tomorrow and you will be active in my place, and how can I speak to you" ³²

The domestic interior is one which consciously and unconsciously tells stories about the inhabitant's life, hinting at the history of lived experiences and evoking (or invoking) memories- real or imagined. It is through traces of use, treasured and displayed objects and discarded detritus of everyday life. It projects the history, personality and priorities of its creator. John Soane's "*house of an architect*" is both highly revealing and highly controlled. Where (or more precisely when) did it stop being a dwelling, and become a uniquely personal museum which allows Soane to speak to future generations? Pallasmaa defines "*home*" in terms of three symbolic groups of elements. Firstly "*elements that have their foundation on a deep unconscious biological level*" (e.g. the entry, roof, hearth, the elements of dwellings outlined above). Secondly, "*elements related to the inhabitants personal life and identity (memorabilia)*" and thirdly, "*social symbols intended to give certain images and messages to outsiders*" ³³. Soane's residence at 12 Lincolns Inn Fields is at once house, workplace and personal museum- a polymath place. Soane envisaged his residence as a treasure chest of spaces, which in turn contained an accumulation of "fragments"; objects consciously chosen, painstakingly assembled and carefully displayed. However, it is in the domestic interior, not on the grand external architectural façade in which this display is framed and encountered. Such interior fragments and their container represented Soane's preoccupations and his eccentricities both while he was alive and through an act of parliament after his death. to this we can also add his and his ego/legacy. Historical accounts of Soane's life and personal

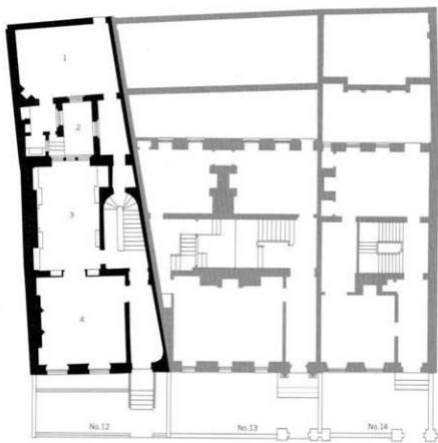
history describe a complex ego: a man from a humble background who wished to construct a new persona as the great artist/architect, the founder of a dynasty of artists whose estate at 12 Lincolns Inn Fields was instrumental in this “fabrication”.

The History of the House



Figure 4: *The Breakfast Room* J. Gandy 1798

Soane's carefully constructed image of his home at this time is clearly expressed in a painting by his apprentice Joseph Gandy (Fig 4) it shows the “happy family” Soane, his wife and two young sons, under the signature flattened dome of the breakfast room in number 12; Piranesi etchings hang on the walls and the office can be seen through the windows.



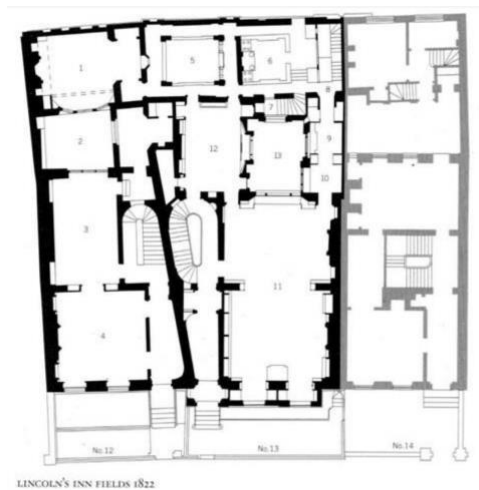
The space was initially unconventional in its architectural expression (a result of the both Soane's idiosyncratic genius and the shape of the plot) but not extraordinary. This early phase begins to explore the familiar Soanian motifs of concealed light sources, and fragmented sequential space. Over subsequent years it became progressively more intimately bound up with the development of Soane's career, personal history and personality.

Soane was a collector, beginning with the fragments and drawings given to him by Piranesi on his trip to Rome in 1778. Over the subsequent years Soane's personal collection gradually grew in both size and diversity as

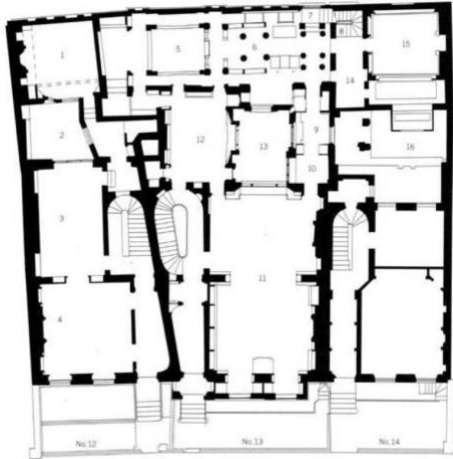
he became wealthier and better established as an architect. The house progressively expanded, first into the mews behind the house at number 12, then the space behind number 13 which was purchased in 1807.



Soane was appointed as Professor of Architecture at the Royal Academy in 1806 and this perhaps shifted the balance from private house to museum. Despite pressure, neither son had shown any ambition to enter the architectural profession and began to invest his energies in a wider audience, beyond his immediate family and circle and towards “students of architecture” who were invited to view the collection.



In 1812 is a significant watershed in the evolution of the house marked by major changes to the fabric, the demolishing and rebuilding of the front section of number 13 and its adoption as Soane’s private residence (number 12 was walled off and let). It also marks a recognition of its change of status, Soane’s wife, Eliza, now tellingly refers to it in correspondence with him as “your house” ³⁴, it is also described in a contemporary publication as an “academy” of architecture ³⁵.



Soane continued to make constant minor alterations and extensions throughout his life, in 1823 he bought the house at no. 14 again in order to extend the museum into its mews ground at the rear creating a picture gallery, the “monk’s parlour” and “monk’s yard”. These last spaces are significant in that they represent an ironic “conscious artifice”. The “monk’s parlour” is not a “dwelling” space in the conventional sense (though it was used), nor is it described as a museum or gallery.

The “monk’s parlour” is instead a hybrid. It is a stage set and a *gothick* curiosity designed to present the temporary illusion of a medieval monk’s cell, but this is quickly dissolved by the ironic references to “Padre Giovanni” (the architect) that Soane includes. 36

Character of Space

Lincoln’s Inn Fields is an extraordinary space on many levels, it confuses and obscures, delights and disturbs in equal measure. This is not a comfortable experience. The space almost defies logical explanation or interpretation, the visitor quickly losing their bearings in the labyrinthine sequence of courts passages and light wells.

Every surface (horizontal and vertical) is a site for the accumulation and display of things; pictures, models, fragments, sculpture, the found given equal status with the purchased, the valueless with the priceless. There is even a skeleton in the closet.



Figure 5:
View of the Dome Area By Lamplight, J. Gandy 1811.

“too much attention cannot be given to produce a distinct character in every building, not only in the great features, but in the minor details likewise: even a moulding, however diminutive, contributes to increase or lessen the character of the assemblage of which it forms a part” ³⁷

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Every surface (horizontal and vertical) is a site for the accumulation and display of things; pictures, models, fragments, sculpture, the found given equal status with the purchased, the valueless with the priceless. There is even a skeleton in the closet. Soane’s house ascribes conventional domestic functions to spaces which are in almost no way conventional spaces; a library, a dining room, the celebrated breakfast room. But the spaces which extend to the rear and beneath the living spaces are those where Soane’s persona seems to manifest itself most strongly. As an illustration, beyond the formal dining room a sequence of spaces links through to the old drawing office: Soane’s personal study and dressing room. These spaces are little wider than a corridor, they bridge and divide the external space (the monument court to the west, the monks yard to the east). They were part of the daily route between the domestic and the professional. As with every other space in the house, they are encrusted with accumulated treasures ³⁸ (including, between the more conventional etchings and drawings, hanging directly above the basin, a plan of the drainage layout of the house).

The threshold between the intimate space of the dressing room and professional domain of Soane’s

drawing office is perhaps one of the most telling spaces in the house. Crowned with a bust of Palladio which faces towards the dressing space, the passage is little more than shoulder width and relatively tall. This is designed as almost a tailor-made suit for its occupant, Soane himself was described as “taller than common and so thin as to appear more so” 39 .

A “crypt” was also created from the wine cellar and furnished with Soane’s prize acquisition; the sarcophagus of Seti the First. This space is deliberately eerie, Soane delighted in lighting it from below with candles but where might that under lit allusions to theatrical eeriness have emerged from? A party in the space was described by a contemporary witness of the time –

“by degrees this space becomes peopled – figure after figure emerges from the crypt and corridors where they had loitered in the gloom: they assemble around the sarcophagus, which sheds from within a pale unearthly light upon the silent, awe struck beings that surround it” 40

There is evidence that Soane used the constant building and rebuilding of his house as a form of “therapy” – a distraction from his personal and family difficulties and an opportunity to explore the creativity and radical architectural ideas that were often thwarted in his practice. He was a complex and troubled character. Egocentric, paranoid and prone to depression, he was continually involved in vitriolic (often public) feuds with his sons. At around the time of the completion of the 1812 phase of building work, he appears to have suffered a period of depression during which he wrote a document called “Crude hints towards the history of my house” (house might here be read in terms of bricks and mortar, or indeed family) an epitaph to the hopes built into no 12 and 13 which he envisaged revisiting in 1830; He imagined “a miserable picture of frightful dilapidation.” 41

This house is unquestionably a personal document and history but it was created with posterity in mind. Having abandoned his hope of an artistic dynasty Soane concentrated on preserving his name, status and reputation through his house. He commissioned a record of the house in 1827 and wrote one himself in 1830 which was subsequently revised in 1835. In 1833 he negotiated an act of parliament (against the opposition of his son) which preserved the house and contents as a museum “for the benefit of amateurs and students” in architecture. He was adamant that the house and the objects within it were an entity, the act stipulating that it be maintained “as nearly as circumstances will admit in the state” 42 in which it was left at Soane’s death. The house reveals what Soane wished visitors to see: his architectural genius, his status, wealth and taste, also perhaps a certain artistic eccentricity. It perhaps also reveals aspects of his physical presence and

complex psyche. One often noted aspect of Soane's architecture house is the use of mirror glass to reflect both light and space, this use of mirror has also been highlighted as emphasising "the self-referential aspect of the house; shadows and light, memory and reflection...enclosed within the labyrinth; the obsessive aspect of Soane's personality, completely at home". 43

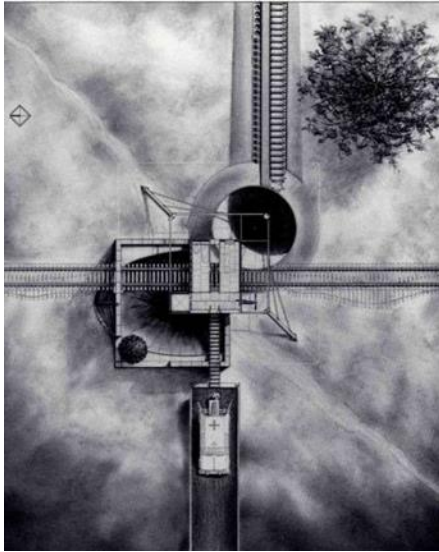
Soane's house complies in all respects with Pallasmaa's definition of home. Yet it is not inhabited by any living presence, having been a museum for the past 150 years. In both physical and metaphorical terms Soane's house is a narrative of his life, at times fictional and/or exaggerated, at times tragic, always compelling.

Douglas Darden: House Derived from Narrative

Soane's house is a well-known and well-documented example of a house of "hidden depths" (spatially, aesthetically and intellectually). Douglas Darden's Oxygen House is more obscure and perhaps still more mysterious. Darden used the unbuilt project to explore the very basis of our understanding of house, home and ultimately dwelling. He took the premise "a house is for living" and reversed it, using the project to explore the idea of "a house for dying".

The client, the central character of the narrative, was Burnden Abraham, a former railway worker confined to an oxygen tent following a near-fatal accident. The programme describes a scenario where the client will live within his tent in an upper chamber, to be buried at the base of the lift shaft on his death. The site of the house is the site of Abraham's accident, purchased by him two years after the event. In addition to the published drawings, the project files contain a series of letters and documents which record the genesis and resolution of project which (according to the files) was never built due to the death of the client soon after footings were poured on site.

This is a house – but its spaces do not need to serve conventional domestic living needs, its client instead requires a space to accommodate his inevitable death. Darden describes the solution as a "triptych": A room where Abraham can lie horizontal within his tent and view the landscape; a "hinge" space where Abrahams nurse can monitor entrance and control his supply of oxygen; and a burial chamber made ready for its future occupant. The composition is controlled by three pairs of regulating lines. Darden begins from the description the "elements" of the project – a list of physical things and places which will generate the organizing lines and define the spaces within it.



Elements

Bright drum torso: living chamber for Burnden Abraham

Stone-fort blockhouse: burial chamber for Burnden Abraham

Shutter-Gate: live-in nurse's quarters

Oxygen Tank: tent support and nurses tomb

Lift: circulation and Abraham's tomb

Tar Road: entry/exit to the west

Life-line: stockpile of oxygen to the east

Derelict track: broken north-south train line (site of the accident)

Wash: dried-up tributary of the Mississippi (cause of the accident)

Spring: source of water

Willow: existing tree, deciduous

Spruce: new tree, evergreen

Figure 6:

Plan at Nurses Level, Douglas Darden

These then generate the organizing lines or “instruments” which define the positions of the elements in relationship to each-other and the site):

Life-lines:

Diagonal: lift, bed, and willow (vertical)

Orthogonal: Visitors tar road (ascending from centre, east to west), finite oxygen stockpile (descending to centre, east to west)

Death Lines:

Diagonal: Dried up wash (horizontal)

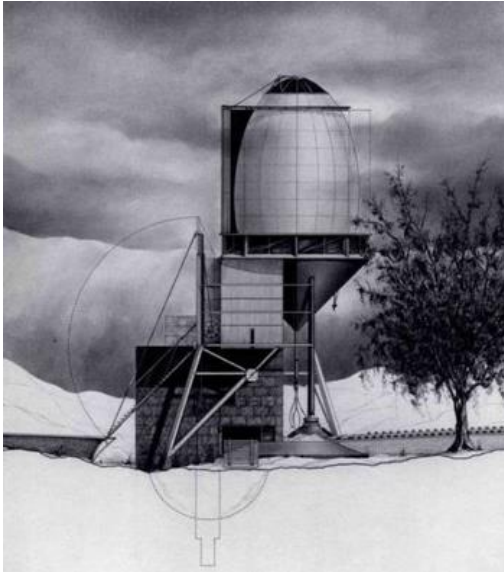
Orthogonal: Broken tracks (descending from centre, north to south)

Mediating lines:

Diagonal: Live in nurses station (vertical/horizontal)

Rotational: Nurse's shutter gate/visitor's stair (view down/access up) 45

Finally, Darden considers the action of the house as verb – how will the generated space be used? How will it define movement and activity in the immediate and longer term? This he labels “operations”:



Operations during life:

Visitor arrives on tar road, heading east

Visitor screened by nurse

Nurse release façade

Visitor ascends stair

Abraham receives visitor

Visitor leaves

Abraham, descends by lift

Visitor leaves on tar road, heading west

Operations after death:

Oxygen tent is dismantled

Abraham is wrapped in the tent membrane

*Abraham's body is removed and buried in the base of the
lift*

Abraham's

bed is used to cover the tomb

Willow is uprooted

Willow is replanted in drum-base, level with field

Drum-torso is dismantled

Drum-torso is relocated over well-spring" 46

This complex and clearly articulated set of instructions for the daily and long-term "life" of the house might be likened to Wexler's "choreography" of the domestic or Perec's defined time-line.

Bachelard: The Oneiric House

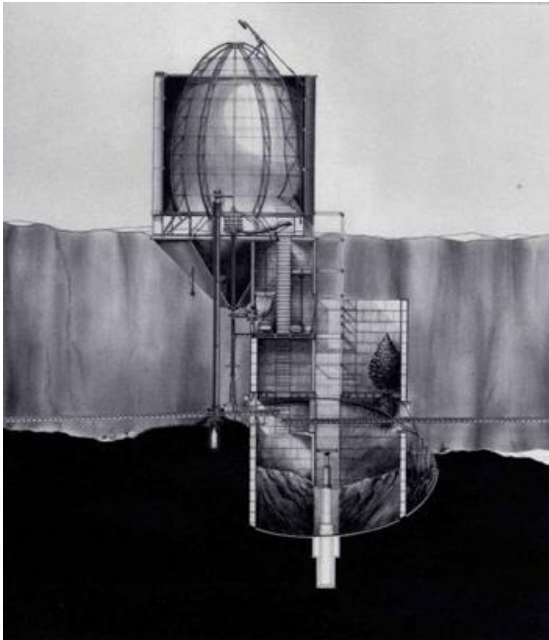


Figure 7: “Anatomical Section” Douglas Darden

Darden’s project is about narrative on many levels. It considers the presence of death in life “a diagonal vein passing through my life” (as expressed in the letter from the client to Darden dated July 6 1979) ⁴⁷. This is an interesting academic exercise in that it challenges the usual basis for a house, but the elements Darden generates through this exercise can also be read as an exploration of the human psyche. The elements of the house; the *drum-torso* held high above the landscape, open to north, south east and west, a place for living ⁴⁸ might be likened to Gaston Bachelard’s “*attic*”; the opposing lift-shaft tomb his “*cellar*”.

Bachelard’s seminal text, “*the Poetics of Space*” considers the oneiric house, one which is inbuilt in the human psyche and differentiated primarily by its verticality. The attic is the place of “rational” dreams – the roof gives shelter and clearly exhibits its *raison d’être* – “in the attic it is a pleasure to see the bare rafters of the strong framework” the cellar is seen as the “dark entity”. Bachelard argues that the space of the attic allows fears to be rationalized, the “days experiences can always efface the fears of night” but in the cellar there remains darkness; “the cellar dreamer knows that the walls of the cellar are buried walls, that they are walls with a single casing, walls that have the entire earth behind them”. ⁴⁹

Burnden Abraham lies in his elevated, open and air-filled chamber, “propped on the pillow with his head raised so that he can see out of the window as his curtains move gracefully in the breeze”, but he is always aware of the space beneath, the inevitable “diagonal line”.

Architecture & Literature: As I Lay Dying

Oxygen house is an exercise in the use of literary narrative. Included in the projects files in Darden's archive is the following note;

"I believe that a work of literature can not only be a source of inspiration for an architectural project, but that a literary work can more directly inform architecture: that is, a novel can be the veritable client for a building's design. This project will be derived from literature." 50

Although the project is presented in Darden's book "Condemned Buildings" in neutral terms which do not explain its complex origins, it was also published in the literary Journal Southern Quarterly in 1994 – prior to publication Darden wrote to the editor explaining the project's intent:

This project displays my ongoing concern with architecture and its broader relationship to narrative space.....Oxygen house is an attempt to draw in architectural terms a parallel text from William Faulkner's as I lay dying. I have not sought to make a set of illustrations for Faulkner's novel, but rather I have endeavoured to make a somewhat oblique equivalent to the story's effects in the configuration of architectural space. "Oxygen House" is a meditation on...the deeply overlapping terrain of fact and fiction, the real and the invented.....

Darden goes on to explain his primary drivers in pursuing the project:

"Firstly, I sought to design a house for a man who could not stand up, that is, for a man who had to live his life horizontally in bed: lying and dying like Addie Bundren (Faulkner's central character and an anagram of Burnden Abraham). Secondly, I wanted the house to convey the bittersweet balance between Abraham's life and his death: the house had to be his life-support system by which he would be completely dependent upon the architecture for his bodily existence, as well as eventually be his tomb. Lastly, I wanted a woman to act as a hinge for the man, mediating between his survival and his expiration. In Abraham's case, the space of the live-in nurse acts as a third element which binds his bedroom and his burial place...."

Darden's central character is derived from fiction; the letters and documents in the file are elaborations and reconstructions of text from the novel. These documents were not comprehensively published in Darden's lifetime but left in the form of clues to be deciphered after his death. The site on the railroad at Frenchman's Bend is taken from Faulkner's map of the fictional Yoknapata County (which his literary characters inhabit) as Darden explains:

"Whether the map is real or not quickly flies from my concerns. It is carved out of a territory which is wholly true and that is what matters. I have attempted to carve a similar territory through Oxygen House." 51

Narrative Space

"To write: to try meticulously to retain something, to cause something to survive; to wrest a few precise scraps from the void as it grows, to leave somewhere a furrow, a trace, a mark or a few signs." 52

The representation of these spaces as empty (at least of a living presence), their inhabitants absent, makes them more rather than less evocative, the architect's presence palpable in the narrative space of the architecture. Both actually depend upon the absence of the central character in order to realize their final form. Like Van Gogh's "shoes" we can read into their fabric a lifetime's existence. Both are designed to challenge, they exist to be deciphered, to weave a complex narrative which brings us closer (but not easily) to an understanding of their creator's ideas. Both architects were interested in the relationship between architecture and what is traditionally thought of as the domain of literature; in the potential of literature to speak about our relationship with the world. Darden articulates this directly, but Soane also refers repeatedly to poetry in writing about his house. 53

The houses chosen are no longer dwellings, perhaps they are better described as monuments to their architects. Both Soane and Darden (who died in 1996) appear to have been acutely aware of their own mortality, Darden's interest is overt however Soane's concern for posterity is also implicit

In one source, the alabaster sarcophagus of Pharaoh Seti the First which is positioned under the main dome is described as “symbolically representing the collector’s own grave “ 54, the crypt space at Lincolns Inn Fields is an archetypal “cellar”. The shared ambition to write their thoughts in a concrete architectural form for posterity is what most strongly links these two examples. Darden concludes his book with a passage from Victor Hugo’s Notre Dame de Paris:

“When the memory of the races became overcharged, when the store of remembered things grew so weighty and confused that the bare, flying verbal record risked losing part of it on the way, man began to transcribe his recollections in the manner that at the same time was the clearest, most durable and natural. Every tradition was sealed beneath a monument”.

But Oxygen House presents us with one further challenge, it is not, and never was inhabited, does it therefore meet the definition of House as “a container of life”? It’s site and its client are equally compelling but equally fictitious. 55 If it is not “material” 56 and existing only in drawings and written documents, can it then be defined as architecture or an architecture of the imagination relying, as it does, on spatial script to evoke is spatial characteristics? The passage from Hugo goes on to consider how the printed word has changed our relationship with architecture, it concludes:

“In the form of print, thought becomes more imperishable than ever; it is winged, intangible, indestructible. It mingles with the air. In the days of architecture, it transformed itself into mass and stone, and took forcible possession of age and place. Now it is turned into a flock of birds, winging its way in all directions, and occupying at the same time every corner of air and space. Architecture is dead, dead beyond recall, slain by the printed book”.

References

- 1- Stilgoe, J. in forward to: Bachelard G. *The Poetics of Space*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994),
- 2- Pallasmaa, J. *Identity, Intimacy And Domicile* 1994, *Encounters* (Helsinki: Rakennustieto Oy 2005) pg.119
- 3- Mulio, c. in *Trespassing, Houses by Artists* Hatje Cantz, Ostfildern-Ruit, Germany 2002 Pg 135.
- 4- Pallasmaa, op. cit., 119
- 5 - Perec, G. *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces*, Translation J. Sturrock (London: Penguin, 1997), 33
- 6- Moore's book *The Place Of Houses* attempts to re-examine the house and from first principles.
It sets out to be a contemporary "pattern book" but one which describes "patterns that help you think about houses"
- 7- Moore, C. Allen, G & Lyndon D. *The Place of Houses* (London: University of California Press Ltd. 1974), 176
- 8- Peter Zumthor writes powerfully about the significance of these "sites" and their role in structuring place memories – in his case his grandmothers table.....Georges Perec fixates on "beds" claiming he can visualize every bed he has slept in (*Species of Spaces* op. cit.,20)
- 9- Wexler, A. <http://www.allanwexlerstudio.com/biography>
The separate rooms in crate house cannot be used simultaneously – the house is either bedroom; bathroom; living room; or kitchen, depending on the function required at a particular time.
- 10- Wexler, A. in *Allan Wexler* (Barcelona: Editorial Gustavo Gili 1998),42
- 11- Schulz, B. in *Allan Wexler* op. cit., 7.
- 12- Bachelard, G. op. cit., 8
- 13- Perec G. op. cit. 31

14- Van Berkel, B. and Bos, C. *Techniques: Network Spin* (Amsterdam: UN Studio 1999)

15- Pallasmaa, J. *Identity, Intimacy and Domicile op. cit.*, 114

16- Heidegger, M. *Bauen Wohnen Denken* (1954), 20,21, 35

17- Norberg Schultz, C. *Existence Space and Architecture* (New York: Praeger 1971), 31

18- Norberg Schultz, C. *The Concept of Dwelling* (New York: Rizzoli, 1985), 30

19- Arnaud, N. Quoted in Bachelard, *op. cit.*, 137.

20- This doesn't mean that the house necessarily focuses inward or lacks openings to the outside world – it means that the house “mediates” between interior and exterior – perhaps defining our relationship with the space beyond. It is self-evident that the house has an external presence, but this is less subject to individual control, it perhaps is more part of urban space rather than the dwelling itself. Norberg Schultz discusses this further in the *Concept of Dwelling*.⁸⁸

21- Norberg Schultz, C. *Existence Space Architecture op. cit.*, 88

22- The selection of the things we choose to bring over the threshold is also significant; we have chosen to bring them with us from the outside, in this respect they are fundamental to our concept of home.

23- Pallasmaa, J. *Identity, Intimacy, and Domicile op. cit.*, 119

24- Koch, A. in *Trespassing, Houses by Artists op. cit.*, 10.

25- Tzonis, A. *The Poetics of Machine and Metaphor* (London: Thames and Hudson 2001) pg. 59

26- Foundation Le Corbusier 31525, quoted in Benton, T. *the Villas of Le Corbusier 1920-1930* (London: Yale University Press 1987), 143

27- Le Corbusier, *Towards a New Architecture* (London: The Architectural Press 1959)

28- *“the birds nest is absolute functionalism, because the bird is not aware of its own death” .is attributed to Sverre Fehn, Quoted in Palassmaa J. Metaphorical to Ecological Functionalism (1993) in Encounters op. cit 186*

29- *Rainer Maria Rilke, The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge – M.D. Herter Norton, translator (New York: WW Norton and Company 1992) 47-48*

30- *Searle, A. Rachael Doesn’t Live Here Anymore Frieze 14, pg 28*

31- *Pallasmaa, Identity Intimacy and Domicile op. cit.,113*

32- *Auden W. H. Writing (1932), in The English Auden (London: Faber and Faber 1978), 303.*

33- *Pallasmaa Identity Intimacy and Domicile, op. cit.120*

34- *letter from Eliza Soane quoted in Darley, G. John Soane an accidental Romantic (London: Yale University Press 1999), 220.*

35- *the European Magazine in 1812 referred to the house for the first time as an “academy” this is recorded by H. Dorey in John Soane Architect: Master of Light and Space Ed. Richardson M. and Stevens, M.A. (London: Royal Academy of Arts 1999), 150.*

36- *Ernst, W. Let There be Irony: Cultural History and Media Archaeology in Parallel Lines Art History Vol 28 No 5 (2005) 582-603*

37- *Soane, J. in Lecture Eleven of his Royal academy Lectures. In Forty A. Words and Buildings Thames & Hudson London 2000 pg 126.*

38- *The dressing room itself is also partially constructed from “fragments”. The central lantern is actually, a wooden presentation model made for Soane’s work on the Freemason’s Hall.*

39- *An extract from George Whightwick’s description of Soane for an 1851 biography, republished in Bolton, Portrait, 395-410.*

40- *Soanes friend Mrs Hofland, quoted in Darley, op. cit. 276*

41- *This is referred to in more detail in Darley, op. cit. 215*

42- *H. Dorey in John Soane Architect: Master of Light and Space Ed. Richardson M. and Stevens, M.A. (London: Royal Academy of Arts 1999), 150.*

43- *Darley, op. cit. 306*

44- *the fact that Abraham is “horizontal” is significant. Bollnow in “Mensch und Raum” points out that “man’s active relationship to the world is characterized by his vertical position –he “takes a stand” or “faces up” - to be horizontal means to give up this position. Darden is also careful to point out that Abraham “cannot climb stairs” – he subsequently organizes the spaces vertically further distinguishing his client from the “active” world which hinges around him.*

45- *It is also noticeable that “rotational” is the only line which denotes movement – this is focused around the nurse – not the client but an enabler.*

46- *The elements, instruments and operations defined by Darden are published along with the project drawings in his book *Condemned Building* (New York Princeton Architectural Press 1993) 143 -156*

47= *Darden, D. *Condemned Building* ibid, 145*

48- *Included in the project files is one page of Walt Whitman’s Poem *Leaves of Grass* – two sets of lines are highlighted. These are reproduced in in Peter Schneider’s essay *The House at the End of Time: Douglas Darden’s Oxygen House* (PART no.7New York 2001) and go some way to explaining Darden’s attitude to Abraham’s drum-torso space:*

*I inhale great draughts of space, the east and west are mine,
and the north and south are mine. I am larger, better than I thought,
I did not know I held so much goodness.
Now I see the secret
of the making of the best persons, it is to grow in the open air
and to eat and sleep with the earth.*

49- *Bachelard, op. cit., 18 -20*

50- *Darden Archive Project file note, quoted in Schnieder, ibid.*

51- *This letter is reproduced in Schneider ibid.*

52- *Perec, G. op. cit.,92*

53- *“the arrangement and decoration present a succession of those fanciful effects which constitute the poetry of architecture” J. Soane quoted in Moore, op. cit., 233*

54- *Ernst, op. cit 600*

55- *This has actually recently been questioned by one of Darden’s students who maintains that he would have enjoyed the irony of a “double bluff”, she believes that the client was actually real but the project presented is a more complex mixture of reality and fiction.*

56- *As Peter Zumthor powerfully articulates in his book Thinking Architecture “Architecture is always concrete matter. Architecture is not abstract but concrete. A plan, a project drawn on paper is not architecture but a more or less inadequate representation of architecture, comparable to sheet music”*